EDUCATION AT THE MARGINS

ASSESSING ASEAN'S LIMITED PROGRESS ON SDG 4 IN 2025

Opinion

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As Malaysia's chairmanship of the 47th ASEAN Summit comes to a close, the theme of "Inclusivity and Sustainability" set high expectations for regional progress. While Malaysia achieved notable advances in several areas, education was the one crucial domain which received far less attention than it deserved. While the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was a prominent feature on ASEAN's agenda this year, SDG 4: Quality Education, was hardly discussed.

Although Malaysia's theme this year taunts inclusivity and sustainability, the Chair's Statements and ministerial communiqués give little sustained attention to SDG 4. The Sustainable Development Goals were often discussed at length, yet discussions often only focused on climate mitigation, green finance, digital transformation, and economic resilience.

Education is the foundation to SDGs progressing. A region cannot meaningfully pursue goals in climate resilience, economic inclusivity, or social cohesion without ensuring its citizens understand, value, and have the ability to actively contribute towards these goals. When SDG 4 is sidelined, progress on every other SDG becomes difficult to achieve.

With less than a decade left before 2030 (the target year by which all 17 of the SDG goals are to be met), ASEAN cannot continue to ignore the widening educational gaps within its region.

Strengthening SDG 4 is not simply about developing schools or curricula; it is about developing the human capital necessary to ensure the advancement of each of the other goals.

This gap is more than a technical oversight. Education is often viewed as a domestic responsibility rather than a regional priority. Consequently, ASEAN's cooperation on education remains fragmented, with no clear regional targets, limited data sharing, and inconsistent follow-up on existing frameworks such as the ASEAN Work Plan on Education (2021–2025). While these documents exist, they rarely gain political traction at the leaders' level.

Across ASEAN, uneven educational outcomes, including literacy gaps, teacher shortages, rural–urban disparities, and limited digital access, reinforce inequality. These gaps also hinder ASEAN's ability to prepare a workforce for emerging sectors such as green technology, sustainable agriculture, and digital innovation. In many states, young people remain unaware of the SDGs, simply because they were never meaningfully introduced in schools.

This lack of awareness undermines public engagement and stalls national implementation.

ASEAN's slow progress on SDG 4 is not due to a lack of commitment on paper but rather structural and political barriers that limit meaningful regional cooperation. Three issues stand out. First, education remains highly siloed within national jurisdictions. Unlike trade or security, where ASEAN leaders routinely push for regional alignment, education is still treated as a domestic policy area. This leads to fragmented priorities, inconsistent quality standards, and limited cross-border collaboration. Consequently, ASEAN lacks a unified approach to teacher training, curriculum development, or educational equity, despite facing similar challenges across the region.

Second, data gaps and inconsistent monitoring weaken accountability. Many ASEAN countries do not collect or publish sufficiently detailed education data, particularly on learning outcomes, dropout patterns, and vulnerable groups. Without comparable regional data, policymakers struggle to identify trends, benchmark progress, or design targeted interventions, undermining ASEAN's ability to track SDG 4 effectively and respond to emerging challenges.

Third, regional mechanisms lack political weight and financial support. Platforms such as the ASEAN Education Ministers Meeting (ASED) and the ASEAN Work Plan on Education exist, but they operate with limited resources and rarely receive attention from heads of government. Without top-level endorsement, education initiatives struggle to move from planning to implementation. Funding for regional education programmes remains modest, limiting the scale and impact of collaborative projects.

These barriers explain why ASEAN's engagement with SDG 4 lags far behind progress on digital transformation, climate commitments, and economic integration. Overcoming them requires political will, new regional instruments, and a recognition that education is not a peripheral goal; it is the foundation of ASEAN's long-term success.

To address these gaps, ASEAN could implement more ambitious and coordinated funding mechanisms such as an ASEAN Education Cooperation Fund. By pooling regional resources, member states could finance shared educational platforms, cross-border research, micro-scholarships for marginalised learners, and pilot projects in under-served communities. Shared funding reduces duplication, encourages collective investment, and creates a foundation for a more unified ASEAN education system, one where resources, tools, and innovations circulate across borders rather than remaining siloed nationally.

Establishing pathways for educators to participate in short-term exchanges, joint certification programmes, and shared professional development is another potential avenue for raising teaching quality across the region. When teachers move across borders, they bring proven strategies, new pedagogical models, and valuable cultural perspectives.

For example, Malaysian educators could learn from Vietnam's literacy initiatives, while Filipino early childhood specialists could support capacity building in Laos or Cambodia. This circulation of expertise gradually builds a shared pedagogical culture, supporting not only SDG 4 but the long-term goal of a more interconnected ASEAN community.

Together, regional funding and teacher mobility form the backbone of a more cohesive ASEAN education ecosystem.

Shared resources and expertise can reduce inequalities, raise standards, and ensure SDG 4 becomes a central pillar rather than an afterthought of regional development. By strengthening cooperation in these areas, ASEAN can build the human capital necessary to advance all 17 SDGs.

As Malaysia concludes its ASEAN Chairmanship, it is clear that the region has yet to fully harness the transformative potential of SDG 4. Education, framed this year under the banner of "Inclusivity and Sustainability", should have been at the centre of regional conversations rather than at the margins. While ASEAN made progress in areas such as digital cooperation and economic integration, the limited attention given to SDG 4 represents a missed opportunity to strengthen the foundation upon which all other SDGs depend. A coordinated approach, through shared funding mechanisms, teacher mobility pathways, and harmonised standards, can help bridge the deep inequalities that persist across member states.

If ASEAN intends to build a resilient, future-ready community, education must be treated as a strategic investment rather than a sectoral

concern. The region cannot meaningfully advance climate action, innovation, gender equality, or economic mobility without ensuring that citizens have access to quality learning throughout their lives.

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